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William Alvord

Theodore Henry Hittell, California Academy of Sciences

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William Alvord

Born January 3, 1833
Died December 21, 1904

SAN FRANCISCO
PUBLISHED BY THE CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
1905

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William Alvord

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Report of Alvord Memorial Committee.

San Francisco, June 5th, 1905.

To the California Academy of Sciences:

Your Committee, appointed to draw up a suitable tribute of respect to the memory of our late President, William Alvord, respectfully begs leave to present the accompanying memorial.

Alpheus Bull,
J. O'B. Gunn,
Theodore H. Hittell,
Committee.

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In Remembrance of President Alvord.

When men of large, complicated, and successful business affairs manifest great and abiding interest in matters of science and art, devote to their cultivation a considerable share of their attention, and contribute to their advancement an appreciable portion of their means, it may be said of them that, though perhaps, technically speaking, neither scientists nor artists, they are nevertheless imbued with true and genuine scientific and artistic spirit. Of such men our late President, William Alvord, was a shining representative, well worthy all the honors we can pay to his memory.

He was a typical American business man of the honorable kind; and, as such, it may be said of him that the more we know of his life and career, the more sincere will be our tribute to his merits. He rose from an humble station. He was born in Albany, New York, on January 3, 1833, and educated at the Albany Academy. In 1850, at the age of seventeen, recognizing the necessity of making his own way in the world, he went to New York City and engaged himself as a clerk and assistant in a large hardware establishment. In 1853, at the early age of twenty, having already by strict attention mastered a competent knowledge of mercantile and commercial problems as well as of the details of trade, he felt strong enough to branch out for himself and fortunately chose California as the scene of his enterprise. He settled, in those pioneer days of our State, at Marysville and established there the hardware house of Alvord and Haviland. After two years of successful business at Marysville, find-

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ing the necessity of a wider field to satisfy his aspirations, he removed to San Francisco and established the large wholesale and importing hardware house of William Alvord & Co., in the conduct and management of which he continued for a number of years.

The close, constant and confining application required for the successful carrying on of this extensive business injured his health and at length obliged him to sell out his interests in the hardware firm and take a trip to Europe for the purposes of rest and recuperation. An enviable reputation for sober and sound judgment, well-calculated enterprise, executive ability, and unimpeachable honor and honesty remained behind; and, after his return from his travels, he was in 1871 nominated and elected by a handsome majority Mayor of San Francisco, which office he filled with credit to himself and advantage to the City for two years. In 1873, when Golden Gate Park may be said to have first started to become a thing of beauty and a joy forever to the inhabitants of San Francisco, he was appointed one of the Commissioners for its improvement and management, in which position he continued until 1882; and it was very much to his artistic taste and judicious recommendations that we owe the privileges of our citizens and our visitors from abroad freely enjoying, even in the midst of winter, one of the handsomest and in many respects most interesting public parks in the world.

In 1878, while still acting as Park Commissioner, he was appointed one of the Police Commissioners of San Francisco. Those, it is to be recollected, were the days of the Sand-Lot Excitements, when strong, reliable and efficient men were needed to look after police affairs; and Mr. Alvord proved to be one of those who could and did guide the City safely through that stormy and tumultuous period. His services in this position were found to be

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so valuable and acceptable that they could not well be dispensed with; and, notwithstanding the multifarious other matters requiring his attention, he continued to act as Police Commissioner until 1899. In the meantime, while thus occupied in public station, he was one of our most enterprising, but at the same time safe and solid, money managers, to whom in great part is due the present exalted position of San Francisco in the financial world. In 1871, the same year in which he was elected Mayor of the City, he became director in the Bank of California, of which he had been one of the original incorporators in 1864. In 1875, when that Bank, which did the largest business and had the most extensive connections with all the older States and all the principal countries on the globe, for reasons not necessary on this occasion to recapitulate, became involved and was obliged to suspend, threatening ruin to thousands and producing wide-spread consternation in the entire business community, Mr. Alvord was one of the most active and efficient of the solid men who came forward to save the credit of the City and State by rehabilitating the Bank, restoring its bullion balances, and refilling its paying teller's trays with current coin.

It might be supposed that this enumeration of employments would be enough, and more than enough, to fill up the entire attention of the busiest lifetime. But the story is as yet only half told. Mr. Alvord's energy and activity, though modest and unobtrusive, were phenomenal. To satisfy his yearning towards art and his love of the beautiful, he became an active member and promoter of the San Francisco Art Association, of which in 1871, the year of his election as Mayor of the City, he was elected president, and continued acting as such by re-election for four successive terms. Afterwards, to satisfy his love of nature and contribute to the preservation of the woods

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and forests, which constitute so great an attraction of our California scenery, he became a member of the American Forestry Association of Washington City, of which beneficent institution he was president during the years 1890 and 1891. It seems that in whatever direction he turned, his amiable qualities, dignified and decorous demeanor and executive ability opened to him and obliged him to accept first rank; and it is almost bewildering to name the societies and associations over which from time to time he was called upon to preside. He was made president of the Alaska-Treadwell Gold Mining Company; president of the Alaska-Mexican Gold Mining Company; president of the Alaska-United Gold Mining Company; president of the San Francisco Clearing House; president of the Spring Valley Water Company; president of the Pacific Club; president of the Loring Club; president of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific; chairman of the local board of directors of the London, Liverpool and Globe Insurance Company; director of the Selby Smelting and Lead Works; director of the United Railroads of San Francisco; director of the Spreckels and Western Sugar Refining Companies; director of the Security Savings Bank, and director of the California Title Insurance and Trust Company.

Of the California Academy of Sciences he became a resident member, by regular application and election, on February 19, 1872, over a generation ago. He joined it in its dark days when it was still struggling for existence and when no one joined except to help it along in recognition of its great value to the City and State as an educational and civilizing institution. Two years afterwards, on July 16, 1874, when James Lick made his munificent donation of over three millions of dollars to the cause of science, art, and philanthropy, of which this Academy was one of the chief beneficiaries, Mr. Alvord was named

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one of the original board of Lick trustees. On February 19, 1897, just twenty-five years after first joining the Academy, having during all those years contributed to its support, Mr. Alvord, by virtue of the constitution, became a life member. On January 5, 1903, he was elected president of the Academy and occupied that position for two years and up to the time of his decease. During those years his health was much affected and it was deemed imprudent to expose himself to the night air. Though he attended the regular council meetings in the daytime, he was not able to be often present at the semi-monthly evening meetings. But there were exceptional occasions on which he ventured out. A particularly notable occasion of this kind was the semi-centennial meeting of May 16, 1903, when it became his pleasant duty to present to Luther Burbank, the so-called Wizard of Horticulture and our now famous fellow-member, a beautiful gold medal, the gift of ex-Mayor James D. Phelan, in appreciation of his wonderful work. It will be recollected by those present at that meeting with what grace Mr. Alvord made his short but pertinent address of presentation; and how, when Mr. Burbank, overcome by his feelings, hesitated in his reply, Mr. Alvord, with admirable tact and readiness, exclaimed, "It is unnecessary, Mr. Burbank, to make any reply: the Academy will speak for you!"—and at once the audience burst out in loud and prolonged applause.

An apparently very small, but at the same time very significant circumstance, illustrative of Mr. Alvord's character, was the fact that he was accustomed, on his visits, as Commissioner or otherwise, to Golden Gate Park, to carry a pocket full of crumbs, which he would scatter about for the delectation of the wild birds; thereby not only gratifying his own instinctive feelings of love to the interesting little creatures but also tending to make

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them attached to the Park as a home where they would always find provision and protection. He was a man of warm affections. Though he had lived the most of his life a bachelor, he in June, 1884, married Mrs. Mary E. Keeney, to whom he became an attached and devoted husband. On May 23, 1903, only a week after our semi-centennial meeting before mentioned, he was called upon to mourn her loss, and her death affected him deeply. At the end of that year, 1903, he was prevailed upon to accept the office of president of the Academy for another year; but towards the end of 1904, on account of the precarious state of his health, being liable, as he fully realized, to drop at any moment, he declined to undertake a further term. His premonitions proved too true. On December 21, 1904, his heart ceased to beat; and his death, as soon as announced, evoked universal testimonials of respect to his worth. In disposing of his estate he liberally remembered the Academy and thus to the last testified his interest in it and in its objects. As before intimated, though he may not have been, technically speaking, either a scientist or an artist; yet it is evident, from what has been said, that he had a true and genuine feeling for science and art, and in all his engrossing and absorbing business affairs regarded them as shining beacons of guidance on his path. And in this connection it may be well to remember that saying of the old Romans, in which there was much truth in their days and is much truth now, that the highest stage of human life is that of the good citizen, to the making of whom all science and art and education of every kind are subordinate. President Alvord was, in a very eminent degree, a good citizen.

THEODORE H. HITTELL.

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